

Syracuse opened its arms to Armenians fleeing genocide: Stephen Kimatian

[PrintEmail](#)



By [Stephen Kimatian](#)

on May 15, 2015 at 12:58 PM, updated May 15, 2015 at 1:17 PM

In an unlikely juxtaposition, the [comments of Pope Francis](#) during a Mass at St. Peter's Basilica and the visit of the Kardashians to Armenia, the country of their ancestry, were tied to a common event that occurred over 100 years ago. The Ottoman Empire Turks attempted the [systematic annihilation of the Armenian people](#). Pope Francis clearly stated this was "genocide," the first of the 20th century, and a harbinger of Nazism, Stalinism and the continuing persecution of Christians to the present day.

On the days leading up to April 24, 1915 in Constantinople, several hundred intellectuals, writers, business and religious leaders of the Armenian community were rounded up, transported by boat and train and taken to a remote village outside the city. There, they were brutally executed. In the orchestrated plan by the Young Turks, coded telegrams were then sent to the provinces ordering the military to kill all the Armenian men and force the women and children on death marches into the desert regions. Over 1.5 million Armenians would perish under the most barbaric circumstances.

The American Ambassador to Turkey, [Henry Morgenthau](#), sent a telegram to the State Department saying a "campaign of race extermination was in progress." Corroborating accounts of the atrocities came from missionaries, foreign consuls, reporters and eyewitnesses. Dozens of articles were published in The New York Times as well as in our local Syracuse Herald and Syracuse Journal. Documents retrieved since, some in Turkish archives, depict the massacres by the Turks in the most graphic terms.

TURKISH ATROCITIES SURPASS ANYTHING IN PAST 1,000 YEARS

Horrible Crimes Being Committed Against Armenians by Order of Gov't, Committee Finds.

NEW YORK, Oct. 4.—After months of investigation and the amassing of evidence from sources whose veracity and authority are not to be questioned, the committee on Armenian atrocities finds that the crimes now being perpetrated upon the Armenian people by direct orders of the Young Turk government in Constantinople, surpass for horror and cruelty anything that history has recorded during the past 1,000 years.

This is how Syracusans might have first read and

learned about the Armenian genocide. A headline from the Oct. 4, 1915 Syracuse Journal. The clipping is in the collection of the Onondaga Historical Association. *Onondaga Historical Association*

Armenians are an ancient civilization, tracing their origins back several thousand years to the "cradle of civilization." Mount Ararat, the resting place of Noah's ark, overlooks their homeland. In A.D. 301, Armenia became the first Christian nation by adopting Christianity as the state religion. As the Ottoman Empire weakened in the early 20th Century, the Young Turks in control turned inward and, under the cover of the world's preoccupation with World War I, **undertook the extermination of the Armenian people.**

In a relatively unknown chapter of Syracuse history, Armenians seeking to escape the atrocities found a welcoming home in Syracuse. Since the days of the "Underground Railroad" movement, Syracuse had a reputation as a community supporting justice. James Roscoe Day, **chancellor of Syracuse University** from 1894 to 1922 and a Methodist minister by training, spearheaded the drive for Armenian and Syrian relief efforts. Together, he and group known as the "American Relief for Syrian and Armenian Refugees" -- whose supporters included President Woodrow Wilson, Teddy Roosevelt, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge and the head of General Electric, Thomas Cook -- took up the Armenian cause.

A brilliant Armenian scientist, Akabi Azadian, who came to Syracuse through missionaries, developed a close relationship with Thomas Edison, George Eastman and Charles Steinmetz, who also joined. The goal of raising \$30 million, the largest relief effort ever undertaken by the United States, was achieved. "The Near East Relief" organization still functions and is housed at Syracuse University. An **Onondaga Historical Association exhibit** (through

July 12th) based on the book by Robert Koolakian, "Struggle for Justice," displaying original documents and photographs tells the story: "With Open Arms: The Story of Armenians in Syracuse."



The Fourth Presbyterian Church, which stood behind the Hotel Syracuse and was torn down in the 1940s, was where many of the initial Armenian Christians worshiped in Syracuse. The Presbyterians welcomed them to share their sanctuary. Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association. *Onondaga Historical Association*

Knowing that religion was a major focus for the Armenian people, the Syracuse community was generous in offering the opportunity to hold religious services. In the beginning, they met at the farm of the abolitionist family Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, along with the Gifford sisters and many others supporters of human rights. The Fourth Presbyterian Church on South Salina and Onondaga streets allowed use of their church.

"Genocide" was a term coined in 1944 by George Lemkin, a scholar on mass killings. He defined it as a coordinated plan aimed at the destruction of an ethnicity. As if to evidence the world's indifference, on the eve of the Polish invasion in 1939, Hitler stated: "Who remembers the Armenians." To deny the Armenian genocide would be to deny the Holocaust was an attempt to exterminate the Jews. [Turkey's denial](#) is intellectually dishonest, morally reprehensible and only reinforces its desperation to escape responsibility. Though Germany, France, Canada, Russia and a host of nations all condemn Turkey for the genocide, in an anomaly of morality, the United States does not take that position.

It may seem improbable that nations and people at such great odds with each other could reconcile, yet history is replete with examples of the bitterest enemies emerging from the bath of history with those wounds cauterized. The United States and the Civil War, the two world wars and the Vietnam War are all illustrations. Instead of bowing to Turkey's fraudulent policies, [President Obama](#) should take a page from Pope Francis and say to the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan: "Mr. Erdogan, it's time to face the truth of the Armenian genocide."

The writer is an American of Armenian descent whose grandparents came to the United States as a result of the Armenian genocide. The Onondaga Historical Association exhibit, "With Open Arms: The Story of Armenians in Syracuse," was curated by Dennis Connors, assisted by Ellen Eagen, daughter of the writer.